

## Models and Approaches of Early Childhood Education (adapted from Dietze & Kashin, 2016)

In early childhood education, the term curriculum **model** refers to a conceptual framework for making decisions about educational priorities, including policies and practices regarding instructional and evaluative methods. In contrast, an **approach** is less rigid than a model and relies on the teachers to make decisions based on context and ethical practice. Models and approaches should be examined from the lens of your values and beliefs about children and your vision about what your program should look like in practice. This is reflective practice and it can lead to “aha!” moments, disequilibrium, or the need for dialogue with others in order to bring clarity to your vision. Each program model or approach has its own distinct features that would be visible in the design of the space, the furniture and equipment, the aesthetics of the environment, and what is posted on the walls. The most common models and approaches are as follows:

### The Thematic Approach

Themes refer to integrating curriculum around a broad topic and has a long tradition in early childhood education. Common themes are based on preschool concepts such as numbers, colours and letters as well as seasons and holidays. Themes usually last one week and often are chosen by teachers who plan ahead providing activities and materials related to the topic. In a program using themes, you should see bulletin boards with product-focused art or thematic crafts. When themes are tightly scripted and depended solely on the teacher, they provide a predictable program sequence for the teacher that can be used from year to year. However, children’s interests and learning are not so clear-cut and predictable.



### **The Montessori Model**

In 1907, Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), Italy's first female doctor, founded Montessori education. Montessori believed that children can teach themselves in a carefully prepared environment. In a Montessori program, the learning environment is neat and orderly, and the materials are self-correcting and accessible. Montessori teachers are skilled observers who receive specific training in order to introduce and model the didactic materials. Practical life skills are emphasized that include doing chores, buttoning and unbuttoning, and pouring and stirring. In addition programs include sensorial, cultural, language and mathematical activities. However, there is a limited offering of activities related to creativity such as art, drama and music.

### **HighScope**

Originally known as the cognitively-oriented curriculum, it was developed by Weikart, Rogers, Adcock and McClelland (1971). Grounded in constructivism it was influenced by Piaget's cognitive development theory. In this program, children plan, carry out, and reflect on their own activities. Teachers join in, engaging in conversations to extend the children's plans, helping them to think through their ideas and identify potential areas of interest. However, overemphasizing cognitive development over social-emotional development is cited by some as not developmentally appropriate.

### **The Project Approach**

Projects have been part of the progressive education system for over 100 years. About 30 years ago Sylvia Chard and Lilian Katz developed the early learning-specific project approach. It refers to a way of teaching as well as the content of what is taught and learned. Based on children's interests, project topics are

chosen that are worthy of long-term investigative learning. They are ongoing and in contrast to themes, lasting far beyond a week. The project approach is considered an emergent curriculum. There are three phases to project work. During the first phase, it is the role of the teacher to find out what the children know, what they want to know and how they are going to find out what they want to know. The second phase, the children, investigate and research the topic, representing what they are learning in multiple ways (e.g., two- or three-dimensional methods). The final phase of the project involves concluding with a culminating event.

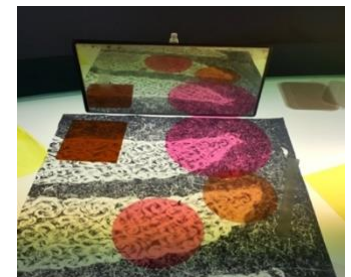
### **Waldorf**



During the early decades of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of World War I, Rudolf Steiner envisioned a better world and developed the Waldorf approach. This program emphasizes the importance of arts-based curriculum that incorporates imagery, music, movement, drawing, painting, drama and rhythm. Steiner developed his own philosophy based on examining more deeply the three parts of the human being (body, mind, and spirit). A Waldorf environment is very distinctive, from the colours to the furniture to the materials that are provided. Outdoor and nature play is a key feature and children participate in gardening and farming.

### **The Reggio Emilia Approach™**

Reggio Emilia is one of several small cities in Emilia Romagna, a region in northern Italy. Shortly after World War II, after the end of the Fascist dictatorship in Italy, parents worked with Loris Malaguzzi, a young teacher, influenced by progressive educator, John Dewey, who created a system of early learning programs based on a philosophy that



supports critical thinking and collaboration, skills needed to ensure a democratic society. The central notion of the philosophy resides in the concept of images depicted in a set of principles. These principles are used to guide practice and are evident in the environment, in the documentation posted throughout as well as the organized spaces that value aesthetics. The principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach™:

**The Image of the Child:** *Children as active protagonists of their growth and developmental processes – children have extraordinary potential for learning and each child has the right to be respected and valued.*

**One Hundred Languages:** *Children possess a hundred languages, which mean that they have a hundred ways of thinking and expressing themselves. A hundred languages is a metaphor of the extraordinary potentials of children.*

**Participation:** *Participation is both a value and a strategy that defines the way in which children, educators and parents are stakeholders who belong to a community.*

**Listening:** *In participated education, active listening is an ongoing process and condition for dialogue and change that raises the threshold of attention and sensitivity towards others.*

**Individual and Group Construction:** *Each child is an active constructor of knowledge, competencies and autonomies. While unique in their learning they are also learning in relationship with peers, adults, and the environment. Learning is fostered by research.*

**Organization:** *The organization of the work, the spaces and the time that children and adults spend is an important part of the Reggio Emilia educational project.*

**Educational Research:** *Shared research is an everyday priority that is made visible by the means of documentation that builds learning.*

**Environment, Space, Relations:** *The interior and exterior spaces are designed and organized to foster interaction, autonomy, explorations, curiosity and communication. These are places for children and adults to research and live together. The environment takes shape in relation to the learning experiences of the children and adults in dialogue with architecture and pedagogy.*

**Educational Documentation:** *Documentation gives value and makes visible the learning processes of the individual and the group. When documentation is revisited, reconstructed and interpreted it assumes its fullest meaning.*

**Individual and Group Construction:** *Each child is an active constructor of knowledge, competencies and autonomies. While unique in their learning they are also learning in relationship with peers, adults, and the environment. Learning is fostered by research.*

**Progettazione:** *The process of planning and designing teaching and learning activities takes shape without applying predefined curricula. Progettazione is a strategy that involves thought and action. It is respectful and supportive of the learning process of children and adults.*

**Professional Development:** *Professional development – ongoing professional development is a right and a duty of each individual and the group. Time and attention are given to make sure that it has a high priority in the educational project of Reggio Emilia.*

**Assessment:** *Assessment is a process that is part of the all aspects of the scholastic life including the children's learning, the professionalism of the personnel, the organization and the quality of service that is configured as a public action of dialogue and interpretation.*

Loris Malaguzzi eloquently described the Reggio Emilia Approach™ as “nothing without joy”. Programs outside of Reggio Emilia whose values align with the philosophy consider themselves Reggio-inspired or in dialogue with the Reggio Emilia Approach™.

...our earthly journey is a journey we make along with the environment, nature, the universe. Our organism, our morality, our culture, our knowledge, our feelings are connected with the environment, the universe, the world. And here we can find the spider web of our life ~  
Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia's educational philosophy